Journal of Victorian Culture, 2022, Vol. XX, No. XX, 1–15
https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcac061
Original Article

The Imperturbable Seriousness of the Circus Buffoon: The Shakespearean Clown on the Threshold of Modern Comedy

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ABSTRACT

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, there arose a type of circus performer in England called 'Shakespearean clowns'. These clowns constituted a transitory figure between the age of Georgian pantomime clowns and the establishment of the typical circus clown in the later part of the century. One of the more neglected representatives of the genre was James Clement Boswell, who enjoyed a brief period of success in England before becoming a sensation in Paris during the 1850s. Although he was universally praised, his clowning also evoked bafflement. This article studies reviews of and periodical articles on Boswell in order to get a picture of his performances and clown persona, and of how critics perceived him and turned him into an example of the melancholy clown trope. The resistance that Boswell's act and persona offered to the writers, however, illustrates that he was part of a change in the figure of the clown from its early nineteenth century incarnation to the twentieth-century clown and comic. Boswell's clowning prefigures the irony and deadpan comedy that would become more prevalent in modern comedy. He is also illustrative of the increasing detachment of the clown figure from representations of a social reality, and the creation of the modern circus clown as an essentially unreal character that epitomizes a separate outlook on life.

KEYWORDS: clown, circus, comedy, James Clement Boswell, Paris, acrobatics, deadpan, Shakespeare

In an issue of the French journal *La Vie Parisienne* of 1865, the domestic clown Auriol is compared favourably with an English counterpart. Auriol is described as cheerful, smart, nimble and graceful. Then the writer invokes the name of Boswell. 'You remember him?' he writes. 'Nervous, feverish, irritated, he dislocated his limbs, pinched the squires, and sneered while doing the gestures of a monkey'. He then goes on to conclude, in favour of the French tradition: 'There is always in the English clown something overworked, forced, or mechanical, that gives him a certain elusive air of suffering'.[1] A few years later, the writer of that piece – the renowned French critic and theatre director Jules Claretie – developed his opinions of that strange English clown, thereby giving us a more detailed picture of him. This time around, he looks back at the performances and personality of Boswell with nostalgia and admiration, praising him by borrowing Hamlet's words about Yorick. But he does not seem to be able to shake off the vague unease about this clown that got in the way of his original appreciation.

[1] Jules Claretie, 'Notes sur Londres', *La Vie Parisienne*, 17 June 1865.

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James Clement Boswell was a famous English clown in the mid-nineteenth century who became especially popular in Paris. He is largely forgotten today. There is no entry for him in the usual encyclopaedias of performance or the circus, or the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The traces he has left behind are often in the form of mysterious and evocative brief descriptions in specialist literature on circus history. In his recent book on the history of the circus, Duncan Wall simply tells us that James Boswell was 'an artist as well as a clown', and that when performing he 'wrapped himself in a bloody bedsheet and ran around screaming lines from *Hamlet*'.[2] Even more strange is renowned theatre historian George Speaight's claim that Boswell's clowning derailed into 'an almost surrealistic black comedy' wherein he would 'pause in the middle of his fooling as if yielding to some macabre fantasy, and . . . run round the ring declaiming the most frightening lines of Shakespeare in a shrill and raucous voice'.[3] Most latter-day references to Boswell portray him as outlandish and unusual, casting him in the role of the archetypal sad clown. In one of the most comprehensive works on the history of the clown, John Towsen surmises that Boswell epitomized this stereotype.[4] As I will try to show in this article, Boswell's perceived strangeness is exactly what makes him relevant for a closer study, both as a manifestation of a transitional phase in the history of comedy, and as a vital precursor to the inherent persona of the modern clown.

Boswell was one of the most prominent examples of a special type of circus clown that became common in the 1830s and 1840s known as 'Shakespearean clowns'. The category contained a number of illustrious performers who became exceedingly popular in their time, especially W. F. Wallett, who styled himself 'the Queen's jester' after having performed for Queen Victoria in 1844. The title of 'Shakespearean clown' appears to have been ubiquitous during a few decades, and many of the famous clowns who performed in circuses used the epithet. Today the genre is forgotten and the term 'Shakespearean clown' is exclusively used to denote the clown characters of Shakespeare's plays. To my knowledge, the only piece of research devoted to the Victorian Shakespearean clown is a two-and-a-half-page article by Speaight. This contains information on both Wallett and Boswell, but its brevity means it merely scratches the surface of what, in its time, was quite a vast and popular cultural genre.

Speaight has difficulty summarizing exactly what Shakespearean clowns did. He speaks of parodies of Shakespeare and word play, but also notes how descriptions of the performances of clowns and comedians in the Victorian period are rare.[5] Wallett published his autobiography, as did several other clowns such as Billy Purvis and Peter Paterson, but these books hardly provide information on the routines of their authors, favouring instead amusing anecdotes from their itinerant and rambling lives.[6] The thing for which they were famous – their stage acts – was something that the reader was assumed to be familiar with already. Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone had very promising sources in their study of two Victorian clowns: one handwritten memoir and one gagbook. Their analysis of these provided insight into the

2 Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey into the Wondrous World of the Circus, Past and Present* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2013), p. 222.

3 George Speaight, 'A Note on Shakespearean Clowns', *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research*, 7 (1979), 93–98.

4 John H. Towsen, *Clowns* (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1976), p. 168.

5 Speaight, 'A Note', pp. 93–94.

6 W. F. Wallett, *The Public Life of W. F. Wallett, the Queen's Jester*, ed. by John Luntley (London: Bemorse & Sons, 1870); James Glass Bertram, *Glimpses of Real Life as Seen in the Theatrical World and in Bohemia: Being the Confessions of Peter Paterson, a Strolling Comedian* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1864); Thomas Arthur, *The Life of Billy Purvis, the Extraordinary, Witty, and Comical Showman* (Newcastle: T. Arthur, 1875).

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working methods and occupational culture of circus clowns in the century that saw the creation of that particular group of entertainer.[7] But the nature of their sources also showed how difficult it is to study performed comedy based on the comics' own scripts and notes. Using reviews and other accounts of performances made by members of the audience gives a biased picture, but it can also provide information on the style of delivery, the nonverbal aspects and the response of the audience.[8] We might employ the method of such theatre historians as Michael Booth and Jonathan Buckmaster, and use reviews to reconstruct performances, combined with theatre historian John Stokes' encouragement that reviews can and should be used as sources for performances.[9] Theatre reviews can be read in the same way that historian Carlo Ginzburg read inquisitors' protocols – by paying attention to the details that the reporting inquisitor did not understand, but simply reported without applying his interpretation to it.[10]

As recently argued by Bob Nicholson, much of the world of Victorian humour remains unstudied, especially the oral and performed dimensions of it.[11] In the current attempts by scholars to direct more attention to Victorian comedy and laughter, a non-elite perspective is being increasingly considered, as well as the extra-verbal nature of jokes and the difficulty but fruitfulness of studying performed comedy.[12] But the study of performed comedy and the comic style of comedians within cultural history is still quite a small area compared to the text-based study of jokes emanating from literary studies. In the latter, several recent theoretical advances are useful in textual humour studies, but less so in analysis of performance or persona.[13] Here, the scholar is often restricted to older theories by the likes of Orrin Klapp, or observations on comedians made in passing by Simon Critchley or Terry Eagleton.[14] Boswell was an early circus clown at a pivotal time in its formation. Using a circus clown as a case study in the history of performed comedy allows us to view the development in a more focused light thanks to the clown's adherence to a more circumscribed tradition.

The history of the modern circus is beginning to receive more attention from scholars, especially in conjunction with the appearance of new theoretical approaches informed by postmodern or poststructuralist positions.[15] Renewed interest in the role of the circus during the Victorian period was stimulated by Brenda Assael's seminal *The Circus and Victorian Society* (2005), which applies the social historian's perspective by showing how the circus constituted a dissemination of nationalistic and imperialistic projects into the world of popular

7 Jacky Bratton & Ann Featherstone, *The Victorian Clown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

8 Bratton and Featherstone are rightly sceptical of this type of source, but fail to consider its benefits. Cf. *The Victorian Clown*, p. xx.

9 Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 86; Jonathan Buckmaster, *Dickens's Clowns: Charles Dickens, Joseph Grimaldi and the Pantomime of Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 10–11; John Stokes, 'Victorian Theatricalities Forum', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009).

10 Carlo Ginzburg, 'The Inquisitor as Anthropologist', in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

11 Cf. Bob Nicholson, 'The Victorian Meme-Machine: Remixing the Nineteenth-Century Archive', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 21 (2015).

12 Cf. *Victorian Comedy and Laughter: Conviviality, Jokes and Dissent*, ed. by Louise Lee (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

13 Daniel Derrin, 'Introduction', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History and Methodology*, ed. by Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 3–18.

14 Orrin Klapp, 'The Fool as A Social Type', *American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1949), 157–62; Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002); Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

15 See especially Paul Bouissac, *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning, and Ritual* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005).

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entertainment and lower-class mentality. Assael also attempts to place the circus clown into a longer historical development of comedy by tapping into the classical notion of a civilizing process of laughter, wherein the fools and farts found funny in the Renaissance are ultimately swept away from elite entertainment by the emergence of the Enlightenment, only to linger in the margins of 'folk humour', despised by the discerning critics of the middle class.[16] This fits into the political interpretation of subversive laughter that she wants to propose, even though recent historians have adjusted this picture of a grand sweep of comical development. In her recent book on court fools during the Enlightenment, for instance, Dorinda Outram has demonstrated how vulgarity and the mocking of the disabled persisted in the eighteenth century.[17]

Historical writings on circus clowns point to two nineteenth-century processes that helped shape its character. Firstly, a transition from verbal to physical clowning connected to the growth in size of circus venues. This also created a division of circus traditions between the European and the American, where the circus tents grew bigger and bigger and clown entrées gradually involved larger troupes of clowns doing chiefly slapstick acts, while European clowns into the twentieth century persisted in more verbal solo acts.[18] Secondly, two clown types become established in the latter half of the century – first the whiteface clown with its conical hat and fundamentally serious demeanour, and then the *auguste* clown with its oversized costume and emphasis on clumsiness, chaos and nonsense. Before this development, the clown was closer in appearance and skill to the pantomime clowns that had been heavily influenced by the enormous popularity of Joseph Grimaldi, which in their turn owed much to the clowns and Pierrots of early modern *commedia dell'arte* traditions. The clown had originally been instated as a common feature of the circus when a skilled horseman in Astley's circus started to pretend he was unskilled and evolved as a counterpart to the riding master. It thereafter grew to become a useful way of distracting the audience while the ring was being prepared for the next act.[19]

Whether or not comedy can be said to have undergone a civilizing process from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, other, perhaps more fruitful avenues are revealed when the long history of the clown is in focus. Sandra Billington, in her classic account of the social history of fools, sees a banishment of the clown from respectable theatre to country fairs and amateur performance after Shakespeare, but also a return to the professional stage in the nineteenth century.[20] How did this affect comedy and the styles of clowns? What nineteenth-century clowning allows us to study is also the interplay between performer and audience that stage comedy necessitates. Through the use of reviews, for example, the flatness of a written joke can be expounded by considerations of how it was performed, the style of the performer's comedy and stage persona, and so on, highlighting what music-hall historian Barry Faulk calls

16 Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 85–86. Assael invokes the classical comedy histories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Keith Thomas. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968); Keith Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', *TLS*, 21 January 1977. For a critique of this perspective in relation to the history of fools, cf. Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 17–21.

17 Dorinda Outram, *Four Fools in the Age of Reason: Laughter, Cruelty, and Power in Early Modern Germany* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

18 Towsen, *Clowns*, passim; Louise Peacock, 'Clowns and Clown Play', *Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, ed. by Peta Tait and Katie Levers (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 81–104.

19 Peacock, 'Clowns and Clown Play', pp. 81–104; Pascal Jacob, *The Circus: A Visual History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 106; Linda Simon, *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p. 190.

20 Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015 [1984]).

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the 'communal circuitry' of performed comedy, or what Louise Wingrove has more recently identified as the ingredient often missing in our understanding of comedy: 'the non-verbal and paralinguistic so central to storytelling and to humour'.[21] One of the more insightful interpretations of the circus clown to emerge in recent years, is Maggi Phillips' notion of the clown as 'diminutive catastrophe', which draws attention to the way that modern clowning has taken the clown role originating as a social caricature in sixteenth-century theatre and turned it into a metaphysical commentary on the regenerative potential of a divergent and peculiar outlook on life.[22] This process is what I believe Boswell illustrates above all.

Boswell's career has not left behind many traces, but by piecing together the few fragments that remain, a picture of his style of clowning can be created and used as an illuminating example of both the distinctive style of mid-nineteenth-century clowning and as a deviant and eccentric clown who prefigured vital developments in comedy by standing out and, to some extent, breaking the rules. This last aspect is also what makes it worthwhile to pursue Boswell instead of any of the more famous and well-documented clowns of the nineteenth century, of which there are several. Boswell illustrates the clash between French literary sensibilities and British popular entertainment, and how this clash generated new notions of comedy, both in the clowning performed by the clowns themselves and in the audience's tastes. He thus provides us with a rare window into the historical development of highbrow and lowbrow culture, and the essential but largely unexplored role of the clown in that history.

According to perhaps the only extant biographical sketch of him – a brief obituary in a French newspaper – James Clement Boswell was born in Halifax, Yorkshire in 1826. The highly romanticized portrayal of him found in this article alleges that he left home at the age of three to work in the mines, which he did until he was 10. 'He saw the sun only once a month and each time he did he screamed, believing there to be a fire'.[23] This tendency to hyperbole found in numerous periodical accounts makes it difficult to learn what is actually true about his origins. The obscurity of them contrasts wildly against the later fame of the name of Boswell, that would go on to become intimately linked with the world of the circus when his descendants created the famous Boswell Wilkie Circus in South Africa in 1913, which ran continuously for 75 years.[24] The progenitor first became known to the public in about 1843, when he joined Astley's Amphitheatre. Opened by Philip Astley in 1773, it is considered the first modern circus building and although Astley himself had died in 1814, it was still a popular venue at the very heart of the British circus industry.[25] Boswell acquired his training as an equestrian and equilibrist before moving on to become a clown – a process that was common in the circus world, as clowns generally required acrobatic skills which they could sometimes surprise their audience with.

[21] Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 30; Louise Wingrove, '"Sassin' Back": Victorian Serio-Comediennes and Their Audiences', in *Victorian Comedy and Laughter* (2020), pp. 207–33. This research owes much to Peter Bailey's introduction of the term 'knowingness' as a fundamental aspect of music-hall comedy. Cf. Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[22] Maggi Phillips, 'Diminutive Catastrophe: Clown's Play', in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, ed. by Peta Tait and Katie Levers (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 105–13.

[23] Ernest Blum, 'Boswell', *Le Figaro*, 10 May 1859.

[24] Charles Ricketts, *The Boswells: The Story of A South African Circus* (Amanzimoti: Charles Ricketts, 2003).

[25] Matthew Wittmann, 'The Origins and Growth of the Modern Circus', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, ed. by Gillian Arrighi and Jim Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 19–34.

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Boswell's name appears occasionally in newspaper notices and advertisements for various touring circuses during the 1840s and early 1850s. In 1852, he advertises himself as 'Shakesperian Jester and Modern Grimaldi'.[26] But it is not until he arrives in France that the audience begin to take notice of him. It appears that Paris was a potentially lucrative market for British clowns, who started to perform there from about 1819, growing increasingly popular over the following years. In the 1820s it was mainly in the form of visiting pantomime performances, but eventually a line of British clowns were employed by the Parisian circuses, starting with Thomas Kemp (1819–1855), employed at the Cirque Olympique from 1853. Kemp passed away only two years later, however, allegedly the victim of severe alcoholism, and the stage was set for a successor.[27] Among the domestic French clowns – commonly known as *grotesques* – Jean-Baptiste Auriol (1806–1881) was the most highly esteemed, and he mainly demonstrated a type of clowning based on his extensive training as an acrobat and juggler. Boswell's skills, though also very much dependent on acrobatics, lay chiefly elsewhere. He gained a reputation for his acts with trained animals as well as for a balancing act that earned him the nickname of 'the upside-down man', in which he stood on his head on top of a pole. According to reviews, he performed at the renowned Cirque de l'Impératrice on the Champs-Élysées and the same company's winter theatre, the Cirque Napoléon close to the Place de la République, both under the auspices of Louis Dejean, the foremost circus proprietor in France at the time.

A British journalist visited the performance one night and reported back with a colourful description of Boswell that suitably introduces us to him as a performer:

> It is curious to observe the effect of quiet English humour on a French audience. Mr. Boswell, the first clown, reigns supreme from the moment he presents himself. He is the Grimaldi of the evening; the spectators at once going in for a laugh, and relishing his odd attitudes and droll salutations as much as if they were at an English theatre when English pantomime is performed. Boswell is an original in his way; he lives day and night with dogs and monkeys, and has taught these animals to play anything that ordinary tumblers can do in Paris, excepting, perhaps, playing at the Bourse. His performances with these *élèves* form nightly a great attraction, and are really amusing. What cannot be taught to a dog or a monkey which turns a somersault? For hours daily Boswell is schooling his quadrupeds for the 'comic business' of the ring. He is a 'motley-minded gentleman' of no ordinary breed, and himself a decidedly clever dog.[28]

The portrayal is tantalizing in its suggestiveness. The writer does not attempt to describe the nature of the tricks he has taught his animals, focusing instead on the personality of the clown himself, who transpires as something of an enigma. While emphasizing his comic talent, the delight of the audience, and comparing him with Grimaldi, he is also careful to stress Boswell's strangeness – he is an 'original' of 'no ordinary breed', spending his days and nights with his animals. Boswell was to become famous for his trained dogs and monkeys, which divided opinion, but when debuting in the Parisian circus, his act appears to have been somewhat simpler. A notice from 1853 describes how the 'debut of the clown Boswell aroused considerable

[26] *Western Courier*, 14 April 1852.
[27] Towsen, *Clowns*, p. 167.
[28] 'Music and the Drama on the Continent', *The Morning Post*, 23 November 1857.

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curiosity' with a speech performed while he was perched on a stool. Speaking in English but 'mixed with French words', Boswell is said to offer an 'entertaining parody of parliamentary eloquence'. But the transposition of the English comedy to a French context baffles the audience: 'One cannot see anything more bizarre than this floury character, mottled with red and black stripes, improvising speeches with an imperturbable seriousness'.[29]

To the French audience, Boswell's clown costume seems to have come across as extreme and grotesque. In an article published after his death he is described as having looked like 'an apparition from hell' and wearing 'the garb of Beelzebub'.[30] Preserved illustrations of his make-up and dress in at least one contemporary print confirms this. Apart from the leotard and flamboyant red-and-blue jacket, his face is whitened with large red stripes across his cheeks, a painted upturned moustache and corresponding upturned black eyebrows. On his head, a red wig with a long red pigtail at the back pointing upwards. In time, he appears to have toned this down by appearing in evening dress, but still with his make-up and an even larger red wig, reminiscent of the typical twentieth-century clown wig.[31] The style of the make-up and costume is reminiscent of other British pantomime clowns of the early nineteenth century, although it would have stood out in the French context.[32]

By piecing together brief descriptions in various reviews and notices, we can draw up a comprehensive picture of what it was that Boswell became famous for. The act that is most frequently mentioned is the one known as *l'homme renversé* – the upside-down man. This involved Boswell climbing up a free-standing ladder, discarding the rungs as he ascended until only a pole remained when he had reached the top, whereupon he proceeded by standing on his head on top of it, his legs up in the air. He would remain upside down for at least a quarter of an hour, while performing various tricks, including drinking a glass of brandy, firing pistols and doing various movements with his legs.[33] His other main act revolved around his trained dogs and monkeys. There is a detailed account of one of his acts with animals in a newspaper report of 1857, which suggests that Boswell was assisted in this act by another animal trainer referred to as monsieur Hodson. It involves such extravagant feats as monkeys being served dinner by another monkey, a monkey dressed as a squire standing on the back of a dog that runs around the circus ring, and a conversation between Boswell and his dog Zéphyr. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the dog actually spoke, as the French critic seems to equal the English tongue with the barking of a dog, but a sort of quarrel between Boswell and the dog is reported, of a type that is quite familiar to those who have seen the last great twentieth-century animal acts before such items were increasingly banned.[34] The perhaps most notable latter-day monkey trainer, Bobby Berosini, whose performing orangutans were a controversial fixture on the Las Vegas scene in the 1970s and 80s, hailed from the Czech circus family Berousek who had worked in the circus since the eighteenth century.[35]

[29] Ch. D'Argé, 'Semaine dramatique', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 23 January 1853.

[30] Antonio Watripon, 'Oraison funèbre du roi des clowns', *Journal amusant*, 25 June 1859.

[31] Cf. "*Le clown Boswell, Cirque Napoléon*", print of drawing by Charles Fernique (Paris: martinet, 1856-57), Bibliotheque nationale de France, cat. no FRBNF44461111; Ad. Laguépierre, 'Cirque Napoléon', *Gazette de l'industrie et du commerce*, 17 January 1858; Marcelin, 'Revue comique de l'année 1858', *Le Figaro*, 3 January 1858.

[32] A similar make-up and wig is seen on the early nineteenth-century pantomime clown Mr Kirby on a print in the Gabrielle Enthoven Collection, V&A: Accession no. S.738-2017.

[33] Cf. Watripon, 'Oraison funèbre du roi des clowns'; Louis Huart, 'Le clown Boswell', *Le charivari*, 19 October 1853; 'Gaité', *Le monde dramatique*, 21 April 1859.

[34] P-A. Fiorentino, 'Théatres', *Le constitutionnel*, 20 April 1857. According to another review, the dog could not speak: 'Cirque de l'Impératrice', *Le nouvelliste*, 28 April 1858.

[35] Vicki Hearne, 'Can An Ape Tell A Joke? Learning from A Las Vegas Orangutan Act', *Harper's Magazine*, November 1993, 58-66.

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These two types of acts are straightforward circus features that establish Boswell as a skilled and basically conventional circus performer. But this is not where he made his name as a clown. As we can sense, the upside-down act was not a clown number, and the animal-training, while decidedly comical, was made in collaboration with another performer, who appears to be the actual trainer. It is in the details that the nature and impressions of Boswell's performances stand apart. Occasionally we find phrases in passing that underpin the notion of Boswell's distinctiveness. A journalist writing about another circus act, remarks that it combines the 'tradition of Pepita' with 'the strangeness of Boswel'.[36] It might sound curious to place the Romani flamenco dancer Pepita de Oliva alongside a clown like Boswell, but it emphasizes the view of him as a nimble and acrobatic circus artist. There are also some passing indications that he performed as a dancer.[37] Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder what the 'strangeness' is that the writer refers to. Another early review makes a parenthetical allusion to him which is similarly mystified: 'As for Boswell, he is dislocated; he walks as nimbly as the frolic of a monkey, and stands upside down on a stick for a quarter of an hour'.[38] It is unclear what the writer might mean with the word 'dislocated' (disloqué) other than its literal meaning. The phrase is only explained by comparing it with Claretie's later remark, quoted at the beginning, that Boswell dislocated his limbs as part of his act. We are never told why.

On the occasion of his death, many journalists remarked upon Boswell's eccentricity and melancholy demeanour, and it seems that both his personality and his acts divided the audience. An incident in 1857 involving one of his trained monkeys received much publicity, both in France and England. The monkey escaped from its cage at the circus building on the Champs-Élysées and climbed into the boulevard's trees, remaining there for several days, viciously fighting back all attempts to retrieve it. Finally it was shot down with the apparently laconic consent of Boswell. One newspaper reports that a female animal lover wanted to purchase it, appalled at the plans to kill it. And the animal-training part of Boswell's work seems to have provoked some criticism. A less than amused reviewer of one performance observes how 'a troop of dressed dogs and monkeys rushes pell-mell into the ring, followed by the clown Boswell, dressed in black, but having kept his red wig and his white face. Monkeys and dogs, do you hear? That is to say a barking and grimacing competition between the canine breed and the simian species. – Really, I cried, leaving my place in a rather bad humour, are we barbarian Scythians or Athenians of Paris?'[39]

The majority of the writings about Boswell are positive, however, and when he suffered a fatal apoplexy while performing his upside-down stunt in April 1859, and subsequently died, his passing was lamented. This is where the writings on Boswell become more detailed, but also more exaggerated, and it is difficult to discern between trustworthy recollections and an emerging mythology. It is claimed by some later circus historians that Boswell was praised by the likes of Théophile Gautier and Anatole France, but apart from a passing reference by France, I have found little to substantiate this.[40] It is quite possible that this is a myth that has evolved from the respective author's appreciation of other clowns – especially Auriol and, in Gautier's case, the famous mime artist Jean-Gaspard Deburau. The fascination for clowns among French intellectuals had been established for several decades. A view of the clown

[36] Charles Monselet, 'Théâtres', *Le Monde illustré*, 9 October 1858.

[37] Cf. Watripon 'Oraison funèbre du roi des clowns': 'danser l'impossible valenciana'.

[38] 'Le Cirque Napoléon', *Gazette municipale, revue municipale*, 16 November 1853.

[39] Ad. Laguépierre, 'Cirque Napoléon', *Gazette de l'industrie et du commerce*, 17 January 1858.

[40] France's reference to Boswell is quoted in Tristan Rémy, Les Clowns (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1945), pp. 44-45.

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as a symbol for the French people or of the perpetual underdog grew into a common trope, beginning probably with the appraisal of Deburau, who became hailed by writers such as Théophile Gautier, Jules Janin and George Sand in the 1820s and 30s. Although Deburau himself insistently dismissed any highbrow interpretation of what to him was merely popular entertainment, the writers turned his Pierrot character into a pure and noble man of the lower classes, a politically charged fantasy deriving from their own social and cultural environment rather than Deburau's.[41]

It is against this backdrop that the writings on Boswell should be read, but there is in Boswell also something else, a grotesque or vulgar quality that discerning writers seem to have trouble coming to terms with. The piece I began with, Jules Claretie's comparison between Auriol and Boswell, demonstrates how the critics initially reacted against Boswell's style of clowning, which was categorized as typically English and therefore ultimately incomprehensible to the French. But then his opinion changed as the legacy of Boswell became increasingly eulogized.[42] It might have begun with a few brief words in a theatre column by Théodore de Banville, commenting upon the recent death of the clown who 'has just passed away at the age of thirty-three, like a simple poet, after having had his aspirations towards the sky and its outbursts of genius. Alas, in light of the current rationality, should we not mourn bitterly a man who consented to walk on his head and dressed in red sequins, with an ingenuous smile and a moonlight face?'[43] Boswell simply becomes an archetypal clown, the clown that should almost always be praised for being the symbol that he is to the poets.

Shortly after, a (probably fictional) funeral oration was published. Among other things, it claims that Boswell used to train cats in New York before coming to Paris to perform with his trained dogs. The writer of this obituary, the journalist Antonio Watripon, claims to have declaimed an ode to Boswell after seeing him perform, and proceeds by quoting it at length, before telling a strange anecdote:

> It is said that one evening, at the time of his triumph, Boswel was seized with a fit of spleen . . . Thus overturned, upside down, his heartaches had perhaps fallen into his head... So that evening, we do not know how, a buckshot had slipped into one of the pistols . . . Boswel probably knew it, since he gave in to an infernal temptation. He directed his mouth to his forehead . . . and fired! . . . By a miracle of fate, the buckshot circumvented the forehead! . . . When Boswel jumped off his mast he had a net of blood that framed his head like a crown[44]

This story is not found anywhere else and it applies to Boswell the melancholy nature of the sad clown that had begun to form as a trope of literature with the depiction of Deburau. Why had this dimension of the famous clown not transpired before? Did his demise transport him

41 Louisa E. Jones, *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (Lexington, KY: The French Forum, 1984); Edward Nye, 'The Romantic Myth of Jean-Gaspard Deburau', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 44 (2015–2016), 46–64; Robert F. Storey, *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). This might be compared to the parallel mythologixing by Dickens of Joseph Grimaldi as a figure outrun by social change. Andrew McConnell Stott, 'Clowns on the Verge of A Nervous Breakdown: Dickens, Coulrophobia, and the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 12 (2012), 3–25.

42 A notice of his death reads: 'M. Boswel, 33 ans, avenue Montaigne, 7'. 'Décès et inhumations', *Le Pays*, 3 May 1859.

43 *L'abeille impériale*, 15 May 1859.

44 Watripon, 'Oraison funèbre du roi des clowns'.

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so swiftly into the realm of legend? A more even-tempered obituary steers clear of such stories and give us a few basic facts: his childhood in Halifax, his training as an equilibrist, the outlandishness of his costume, and ends by stating: 'Married to a successful squire, father of three children whom he adored, his life was calm and orderly'.[45] And yet, the mystery surrounding him endured.

The colourful description of Boswell by George Speaight quoted in the beginning of this article comes from French writer Alidor Delzant's biography of the writer brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. It seems that in Edmond de Goncourt's 1879 novel *The Zemganno Brothers*, a story about two brothers performing as clowns, the portrayal is partly based on Boswell. De Goncourt himself writes in his journal of 1876 that he wishes to depict in the performances of these clowns the 'working-class poetry which found its issue in the fantastic, which the English clown brought into play in his performance'.[46] Delzant interprets this to mean explicitly Boswell, and describes him in his book as the 'spleenetic Botwell' [sic] who 'sometimes, in the midst of his acts, as if yielding to a macabre fantasy, draped himself in some tassel and, imposing the tragic character with his face whitened for laughter, roamed the ring declaiming Shakespeare's most frightening verses in a shrill and hoarse voice'.[47] The account sounds fanciful, but Delzant attests to the admiration of both Gautier and Barbey d'Aurevilly of this English clown, and it might be that Delzant had access to sources lost over time. This passage is also interesting in that there is something jarring in the French intellectual's wish to portray a clown poet, a representative of the nobility of the people, but having to deal with the rowdy and unattractive aspects of his performance. Perhaps Delzant was too close in time to Boswell's own lifetime to fictionalize him too much.

If this is so, it applies even more to Claretie's reappraisal. As stated at the beginning of this article, Claretie expressed his doubts about Boswell, much preferring Auriol, but in an article first published in September 1881, and later included in his yearbook *La Vie à Paris* for the same year, he provides a fuller picture. He introduces Boswell firmly as 'le clown shakespearien' and describes him as 'the most original and strangest of comics, with a most profound irony', then quickly adds the famous lines from *Hamlet*: 'a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy'. He speculates that Boswell may have been his nickname, which is natural since he seems only to have been referred to by this name in France, sometimes, as we have seen, inaccurately as Boswel, Botwell or even Bothwell. He was 'smeared with white, painted like a savage' and had 'macabre jokes that caused shivers down the backs of the audience. There was, in this circus buffoon, something vaguely terrible. His laughter had a broken sound like a cracked bell'. Claretie then paints the scene that evidently inspired Delzant:

> Sometimes when some beautiful young girl in a short skirt, her shoulders and arms bare, triumphant under the salutations of the crowd, stopped in the middle of her exercises while the banners and hoops were being prepared for her and she patted her horse with her little hand, Boswell, coldly, would come up and stand in front of her. He wrapped himself, as if in a Greek tragedian's toga, with vast draperies, and there, face to face, mournful, frightening, while the audience was writhing with laughter, he recited in English to the pretty creature some passage from Hamlet's monologue. The audience didn't understand; the squire was smiling. He spoke with a sort of nervous frenzy,

[45] Ernest Blum, 'Boswell', *Le Figaro*, 10 May 1859.
[46] *The Journal of the De Goncourts*, trans. and ed. by Julius West (London: T. Nelson, 1900), p. 236.
[47] Alidor Delzant, *Les Goncourt* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1889), p. 221.

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> at the same time grotesque and fierce, about 'that undiscover'd country, from whose bourn, no traveller return …' And, draped in the white cloth striped with red, his floury face with his wide mouth bleeding like the lips of a child smeared with blackberries, he looked like some caricature spectre wrapped in the bloody shroud of a dead man.[48]

Although Claretie assures us that the audience was writhing with laughter, it is the macabre and frightening aspects of the scene that come across most vividly. He seems bent on conveying the profound irony that he spoke of, the way in which Boswell's appearance centred around his parody of Shakespeare and serious acting. What is described here is a typical clown entrée in which the clown distracts the audience from the stage hands' preparation of the ring for the next act. But this entrée stands out in its extreme and bombastic nature. Although Claretie certainly colours the narrative with his own flourishes, it is not difficult to envisage this scene when contemplating the flamboyant and almost diabolical make-up that Boswell appeared in. It is especially evident in a caricature of him included among the prominent personages of the year 1858 in a group cartoon in *Le Figaro*, where he is seen in evening dress but with his large red wig and the upturned pointed black strokes of the moustache and the eyebrows that create parallel lines. Such a face would be very suitable for a performance of this type. The caption reads: 'I don't understand, someone said, what's so funny about Boswell. – To be sure, said another: He laughs in English'.[49] It seems that his Englishness was the source of both his popularity and the audience's incomprehension.

Claretie also recounts a brief episode when he again performed his clowning as much for the horsewoman as for the audience:

> Boswell sometimes took pleasure in taunting her, abruptly removing the paper hoop through which she was going to jump and looking at her with a weird look, his eyes fixed, uttering some throaty cry accompanied by a nervous hopping. The rider shrugged her shoulders and thought that this man was crazy. Maybe he was.[50]

Claretie claims that people suspected Boswell of being in love with this horsewoman with whom he never spoke except in the ring. 'Outside of the ring', he notes, 'Boswell was quiet and pensive; a hypochondriac, they said. . . . [He] read a lot and spoke little'. It is a cliché, perhaps, and written more than 20 years after his death, this portrait sounds a bit touched up. It comes across as an attempt to explain the strangeness of some of Boswell's performances, and what better way to fit it into the current sensibility than to say that his strange behaviour was a consequence of secret infatuation? It is a trope that follows in the footsteps of the intellectual reinterpretation of the Pierrot character in the age of Deburau a few decades earlier, and suggests the way clown acts were reshaped when taken up by literary culture.[51] But in Boswell there is something that resists this adaptation. Claretie appears simultaneously attracted and vexed by this, portraying him as a loner and philosopher, but not excluding the possibility that he was crazy.

The body language and conduct that Claretie describes must be taken with a pinch of salt, but it is tempting to see in them a prototype of the typical way of behaving of the modern

[48] Jules Claretie, *La Vie à Paris* (Paris: Victor-Havard, 1881), p. 354.
[49] Marcelin, 'Revue comique de l'année 1858', *Le Figaro*, 3 January 1858.
[50] Claretie, *La Vie à Paris*, p. 355.
[51] Cf. Storey, *Pierrots on the Stage*, pp. 42–53.

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circus clown – jerking, exaggerated movements, a sudden mixture of mobility and stillness. But in Boswell it is combined with edginess and tension. The staring eyes and the throaty cries are undeniably unsettling in all this, and these features do not appear to be the fanciful fabrications of the writer because he himself has trouble explaining them. The Shakespearean clowns back in England performed with monologues and gags, more verbal than physical comedians. Boswell began as a Shakespearean clown, but working in a foreign country, he was forced to adapt his style to this new context. The Shakespearean part thus collapsed into nonsense. The words became secondary to the style of delivery, and this delivery grew increasingly hyperbolic and inflated. On the surface a parody of a pretentious tragedian, but coming across more as a sort of rowdy surrealistic farce. A later reminiscence of him has forgotten the verbal part of his act: "Stiff, thin, slender, the true type of his race, Boswell too hardly spoke. In its time, around the middle of the century, oratory was little cultivated by clowns. They simply gesticulated and gave off some kind of chuckle from time to time, which, it seemed, went straight to the spectator's spleen.'[52] Since this was written some years after the fact, however, we might be wiser to trust the words of Maurice Sand in his 1859 review when he says of Boswell: 'he is not silent like our Pierrot, on the contrary he carries on with ridiculous conversation.'[53]

If Claretie's characterization seems unreliable, it can be compared with a description of Boswell made while he was still alive. In a review published in 1856, the critic Paul de Saint-Victor once more compares him to the French style of clowning:

> French clowns are lively like squirrels, laughing like a hundred flies, clever and grimacing like monkeys crunching hazelnuts; but before them stands the great mocking specter of the English clown Boswel, who towers over them with all the superiority of an infernal devil over Nuremberg puppets. He is almost sinister, this Boswel, with his floury face, tattooed with black commas, and his reddened wig at the end of which wriggles a little pug tail. He is pale, sly, phlegmatic; he premeditates his least lazzis like crimes; he has a way of straightening his spine, when he has just fallen to the ground, which is reminiscent of the hindquarters of a camel removing itself from the mould it has made in the sand. His comic process is like that of all the clowns of British clowning; it consists in jumping abruptly from one side to the other without warning, by eccentric leaps and bumps: it changes in the twinkling of an eye from the politeness of a gentleman to the brutality of a boxer, from an open hand to a closed fist, from a sweet voice to a ferocious growl. . . . The tiger, changed into a cat, has a big back and meows sweetly. What is strange in this Boswel is that he keeps an icy coolness in the midst of his antics. English clowning still resembles a wonky engine: the legs may twist, the arms may entwine and turn joyfully in crazy arabesques, and in the middle of this crazy whirlwind sneers imperturbably a dull, serious, shaved, spleenetically English head, who looks at you with colourless eyes and seems to protest with his deep sadness against the extravagance of his limbs.[54]

It is noteworthy how frequently the critics allude to his nationality, as if this in some way explains his strangeness. But England is not far away enough to account for it on its own, so the writers take to comparing him with devils or animals. The enormous outpouring of

[52] Edouard de Perrodil, 'Monsieur Clown', *L'illustré nationale*, 2 April 1899.
[53] Quoted in Victor Leathers, *British Entertainers in France* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1959), p. 139.
[54] Paul de Saint-Victor, 'Théatres', *La presse*, 22 June 1856.

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adjectives in this review seems to be a way of looking for the best description of Boswell, and the impression is one of an unsettling menacing quality hidden underneath the frivolity, but not very deep. Above all, Saint-Victor repeatedly refers to the abrupt changes from merriment and manners to fierceness and aggressiveness, something that Claretie also indicates, and the clown's apparent seriousness while doing his slapstick. They are fond of drawing attention to the melancholia lurking behind the clown's mask, but what they are describing here can also be compared to what in the twentieth century became known as 'deadpan comedy', which basically means performing comedy with a straight or expressionless face. The expression was coined in the 1920s and although not initially linked to him, it has become associated with Buster Keaton's way of acting.[55] Keaton noted in interviews that he realized early on in his vaudeville career that audiences laughed more when he himself kept a straight face in the midst of the clowning.[56]

Already from the start of his French career, Boswell's 'imperturbable seriousness' was remarked upon by critics, as we have seen. The method of deadpan comedy was first given a name and identified as a foundation for comedy in the twentieth century, but, as recently noted by Sarah Balkin, it was a mode of comic performance that emerged gradually in both American and English stage comedy during the 1830s and 40s, identified in some comic actors and early music-hall performers.[57] As an approach to comic delivery, there is no reason to think it did not exist prior to the nineteenth century. John Towsen notes, for instance, that the great seventeenth-century Parisian mountebank Tabarin uttered his 'ribald jests' with 'a deadpan expression', to the amusement of the crowds. The dominant impression of early modern clowning, however, is that it relied chiefly on a more loud and boisterous form of acting that served the outdoor venues of theatres and town squares where it was usually performed.[58] For example, the perhaps most well-researched category of early modern comedians, the clowns of the Elizabethan theatre, most likely acted in a very rumbustious and loudmouthed way which sometimes can be gleaned from the preserved playtexts.[59]

The twentieth-century uses of microphones and movie cameras would of course reinforce the move towards a subdued type of comedy that was already underway in the nineteenth century. But although Boswell's type of clowning may have prefigured deadpan comedy, to apply the term to him slightly misses the point. What we might identify as deadpan before the fact should rather be seen as a development of the Shakespearean clown act. The most famous Shakespearean clown in England, W. F. Wallett, based much of his comedy on speeches consisting of puns and nonsensical disquisitions on fools, expounding on the classical floating border between people who work as fools and people who are fools.[60] Similar speeches were evidently performed by other clowns who used the Shakespearean epithet, as demonstrated not least by Bratton's and Featherstone's research, where the Shakespeare connection was loose to say the least – occasionally quotes from Shakespeare were inserted or paraphrased in humorous ways.[61] But most likely there was more to the Shakespeare label than that. Another

55 'dead-pan', *OED* <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 15 September 2021].

56 *Buster Keaton: Interviews*, ed. by Kevin W. Sweeney (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 87, 107.

57 Sarah Balkin, 'Theory: Deadpan and Comic Theory', in *A Cultural History of Comedy in the Age of Empire*, ed. by Matthew Kaiser (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 43–66.

58 Towsen, *Clowns*, p. 54.

59 Cf. David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

60 His speech is quoted at length in Speaight, 'A Note'.

61 Bratton and Featherstone, *The Victorian Clown*, pp. 153–54, 186–88.

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Shakespearean clown, Peter Paterson, became a clown only after the discovery that his serious Shakespearean acting was so bad it evoked laughter. He thus built much of his subsequent clowning on parodies of Shakespeare, which seem to have worked well with audiences at a time when overacting and melodramatic performances of Shakespeare were beginning to fall out of fashion and transcend into self-parody.[62] And when the English clowns were becoming fashionable in Paris, they were identified above all by their performances of passages from Shakespeare.[63] Since the popularity and custom of the circus clown undoubtedly emanated from British culture, the establishment of the English clowns in Paris around the middle of the century is a key stage in the history of the clown and the development of comedy. Paris became a springboard for subsequent changes in clowning across the continent.[64]

Boswell is at the centre of this development in that the foreign context allowed him to turn the Shakespeare parody into a type of nonsense that was to become a hallmark of later clowns. He certainly differed from his predecessor as most prominent English clown in Paris, Thomas Kemp, whose style by all accounts leaned more towards whimsical and light-hearted Italian *commedia*, based on acrobatics and juggling. Kemp constituted a vital step in the development of the clown from Grimaldian pantomime to the circus, but his Parisian career proved too short to give a lasting impression.[65] Boswell added the dimensions of eccentricity and malice so often remarked upon by the French critics. The accounts of his declamations of Shakespeare and of his stage presence are strong indications that he took the style of the English Shakespearean clowns and adapted it to the French context by emphasizing the nonsense of the language he knew his audience did not understand and by accentuating the conceited seriousness and self-importance of the actor in order to turn it into a relatable stereotype. But in Boswell's hands the stereotype turned into something else.

Although one might glimpse origins of deadpan comedy in Boswell, the type of clown he represented did not adhere to the middle-class respectability which Balkin reads into the emergence of Victorian deadpan.[66] The clown accommodated the arbiters in a different way. While many of the early and mid-nineteenth-century clowns became prototypes for the archetype of the sad clown through their adoption by critics and writers, there was simultaneously a development of clowning and comedy techniques that fed into this intellectual interpretation, but was ultimately something different. Although this other dimension is much more difficult to grasp, it constituted a change in the way comedians related to their audiences and perhaps also was symptomatic of a transition in western humour more broadly. Where such a transition began is difficult to establish, but the case of a clown like Boswell allows us to identify a few possible factors: the interaction between highbrow philosophical interpretations of clowning and the development of clown acts after popular tastes; the growing dismissal and parodying of theatrical acting with the expansion of popular theatre and penny theatres; and the 'return' of clowns to stationary and official theatre venues (to which circuses after all still very much belonged) forcing them to adapt and allude to new contexts.

If we rely on Sandra Billington's notion of the banishment of clowns from the theatre after Shakespeare until the age of Grimaldi, then we must also consider what this meant for the

62 Billington, *A Social History*, pp. 94–95.

63 Cf. Francois Oswald, 'Chronique de Paris', *Paris-Capitale*, 12 February 1890; Hugues Le Roux, *Les jeux du cirque et la vie foraine* (Paris: Plon, 1889), p. 207.

64 Cf. Billington, *A Social History*, p. 97; Le Roux, *Les jeux du cirque*, p. 214.

65 Towsen, *Clowns*, p. 167; Leathers, *British Entertainers*, p. 137.

66 Balkin, 'Theory: Deadpan and Comic Theory', p. 57.

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development of comedy in the modern period. New research sheds light on the importance and omnipresence of comedy in the Victorian era, and how its diversity is revealed when literary humour is considered in tandem with everyday jokes and popular comedians. Stage comics were moving away from the raucous and loud style of the early modern clown towards the increasingly subtle and ironical idiom of modern comedians, but the development of popular comedy is not simply one of a transition from loud to subtle, or vulgar to tasteful. Not all modern comedy is subtle and tasteful. The new conditions for performing, and an increased interaction between performer and critic thanks to an expanding media landscape, meant that comics generally and clowns especially were able to make their comedy more distinctive and self-contained. At the same time as the clown became further removed from the social caricature of a rustic that it had originally been, it began to indulge the critics by striving for a more stylized form. Both crowds and critics had to be contented. Thus the mid-nineteenth-century clown, epitomized by Boswell, offers a unique moment in the history of comedy, a threshold upon which the anarchy of the early modern clown coexists with the restraint of modern comedy.

The relevance of a nineteenth-century clown like Boswell becomes clearer in hindsight when looking at his work in comparison with that of twentieth-century clowns like Grock or even Chaplin. As Maggi Phillips observes, the clown is apparently incompetent and clumsy, but through his perseverance and adherence to his own distorted view of the world, he triumphs. Phillips sees the catastrophic element of the clown as a creative force that opens up other ways of knowing and comprehending. Using Beckett's classical formulation, she sees the clown's way as showing how to 'fail better'.[67] In the twentieth-century clowns that she refers to, this is coupled with a vulnerability that speaks to the audience's empathy, but when we go back to the clowning of the mid-nineteenth century, this vulnerability is not as apparent, the clown still being linked to the early modern carnivalesque ruthlessness that did not allow for any sentimentality. This lack of sentimentality characterizes Grimaldi, certainly, and it is taken one step closer to the modern view of comedy in Boswell, who demonstrates ineptitude and failure, but with a demeanour akin to an absurdist type of comedy that was to become more frequent in the following centuries. In particular, however, his strange clowning seems to indicate a turning point, or at least an ongoing change, in performed comedy during the mid-nineteenth century. The clown that Grimaldi had effectively detached from the social world to which it belonged in early modern drama was now being turned into a completely unrealistic masked being, teasing and tormenting the other circus performers. Its demonic and unsettling qualities fed into the absurdist and metaphysical interpretations of the clown of later theorists, ultimately contributing to turning clowning from a menial craft of low status into an art form praised by discerning critics.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council [grant number 2019-02832].

[67] Phillips, 'Diminutive Catastrophe', pp. 108–9.

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